

## **Infiltrating an e-Tribe: Marketing within the Machinima [Computerised Games] Community**

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**Abstract**

Relationship marketing principals of co-creating value and interactivity through a process of co-production are fundamental (e.g., Ballantyne, Egan, et al) and yet there has been little investigation into how this translates to an online socially networked context. This paper examines one such online tribal community to investigate its characteristics and examine its relationship marketing potential. Drawing on the social psychology literature and in particular, the self and social identification and tribal marketing literature, this paper explores the concept of tribalism and tribal marketing within one such net based community. Machinima is the making of 3D animated films using computerised games engines in real time. Findings suggest the Machinima community exhibits many of the features of a tribal based community but in an on-line environment which is informed by the media and the message. Commercial organisations appear sensitive to the values of the community and their marketing activities may be described as both ‘covert and collusive’. Where this is successful, tribal members collaborate and become critical informants to the community. The implications of these findings suggest organisations will need to consider more subtle and sophisticated relationship marketing activities within some e-contexts than have been used in more traditional offline contexts if they are to be successful.

## INTRODUCTION

Relationship marketing principals of co-creating value and interactivity through a process of co-production are fundamental (e.g., Ballantyne, Egan, et al) yet there has been little investigation into how this translates to an online socially networked context. This paper examines one online tribal community to investigate its characteristics and explore its relationship marketing potential. Whilst recent literature on social networking theory has tended to concentrate on 'brand communities' (e.g. Cova *et al.*, 2007) and off-line tribal behaviour (e.g. Moutinho *et al.*, 2007), there is relatively sparse literature on on-line or net based tribal marketing contexts. Second generation web based technologies and tools such as wikis, blogs, vlogs and social network sites such as Facebook, Flickr, and YouTube have enabled groups of geographically dispersed individuals to share opinions and ideas about their consumption activities largely outside of the control of brand owning organisations (e.g. Scoble and Israel, 2006). Such communities have been powerful in influencing organisational marketing activities (e.g. Anderson, 2006; Tapscott and Williams, 2006) although many organisations struggle with understanding the complexities and subtleties of this type of customer behaviour and how best to maximise its potential. Drawing on the social psychology literature and in particular, the self and social identification and tribal marketing literatures, the aims of the study were to understand the nature and characteristics of a contemporary virtual community, the modes of customer involvement with the community, the role of second generation web technologies, and attitudes towards commercialisation and marketing behaviour.

The paper is structured as follows. In order to present a cohesive account of the research, a brief synopsis of the salient literature on self identity and tribalism and its

pertinence to a virtual community context is presented. Subsequently, the paper explains and justifies the methodology adopted for this research. This is followed by a definition of the research context, using an ethnographic approach to review the emergence of Machinima and its community. Findings from depth interviews with key informants, researcher-participant observation and content analysis of community blogging websites and various published and unpublished materials collated for the study are presented. Finally, managerial implications and limitations of the study are discussed.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### *Self Identification and Social Identity and Tribalism*

Self identification theory suggests that the portrayal of ‘self-image’ may often manifest itself in an individual becoming an ‘*enthusiastic devotee of some particular consumptive object*’ (Hunt *et al.*, 1999). Intrinsic with this is that a level of attachment exists between an object and the individual, the strength of which is determined by a schema containing perceptions, beliefs and expectations associated with the object (e.g. Hunt and Bashaw, 1999). In some cases, such objects are used by individuals to identify their perceived self with their actual self through a self identifying process (e.g. Ball and Tasaki, 1992). Furthermore, social identity theory proposes that individuals will also classify themselves into a number of social categories in order to facilitate self-identification within their own social environment (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). This ‘*oneness or belonging to a group*’ (Gwinner and Swanson, 2003:277) may enhance self-esteem, positive social identity and social prestige (Hogg and Turner, 1985) and evoke feelings such as ‘camaraderie’, a sense of ‘community’ and ‘solidarity’ (Zillman *et al.*, 1989). Social identity theory suggests that individuals seek

to identify with groups that have attractive or perceived ‘prestigious’ public images (Dutton *et al.*, 1994). These perceptions of deep level similarity impact on the degree of social identification an individual may have with pertinent groups (Jehn *et al.*, 1999). Where this results in an intense ‘*community of emotion or passion*’ (Cova and Cova, 2002:598), tribal analogies have been drawn. Cova and Cova (2002) define a tribe as “*a network of heterogeneous persons linked by a shared passion or emotion*” (p. 602). It may perhaps be pertinent at this point to differentiate between commonly used terms such as ‘communities of practice’, ‘brand communities’ or ‘communities of interest’ and tribes. Communities of practice (Wenger and Snyder, 2000) are focussed upon organisational learning and knowledge regeneration, rather than learning for social purpose or enterprise which are typified by communities of interest (eg., Armstrong and Hagel, 1995) where communication among actors of the network may be intensive but focussed around a unifying topic of interest. Indeed, such unifying topics of interest may revolve around the consumption of particular products or activities. However, whilst individuals may be ‘devotees’ (Kozinets, 1999) of a particular form of consumption activity or object, they are not necessarily loyal to any individual brand that may fall within that consumption activity. Hence, whilst such individuals may be willing to express their emotional attachment through displaying their loyalty and identification to the ‘tribe’ by particular types of behaviour, in contrast to brand communities, this may not necessarily involve the consumption or display of a particular brand. That said, when a tribe is focused on a cult-object such as Harley Davidson motorcycles then similarities may be identified.

### *Social Identification Theory and Virtual Tribal analogies*

Tribal members are recognised and recognise themselves as members of a group within a social environment (Ashforth and Mael, 1999). Drawing on the characteristics of '*post-modern archaic societies*', they do not rely on a central source of power; they take collective action; they draw on kinship and finally; they may participate in 'clan-like' behaviour (Cova and Cova, 2002). Tribalism is different to the concept of a community insofar as it may manifest itself in 'non-rational' behaviour (Cova and Cova, 2002). Furthermore, Maffesoli (1996) suggests that tribes are unstable, small scale, 'affectual' and not fixed to modern societies. Tribal behaviour will often involve gathering and performing ritual acts in public places known as 'anchoring events' (Aubert-Gamet and Cova, 1999). Drawing on parallels with social relationships, Cova (1999) suggests that tribes rely on such anchoring events to sustain its membership, to reaffirm and strengthen the underlying values of the group and to provide a platform to bring together and bond individual members of the tribe. However, the extent of 'immersion' in tribal activities may vary from 'practitioners' whose daily lives are embedded within the tribe to 'sympathisers' who are marginally integrated into the tribe (Cova and Cova, 2002).

When viewed from a virtual perspective, there has been some discourse as to whether more traditional interpretations of community and/or tribal attributes may exist in an on-line environment and, if so, to what extent are their characteristics transformed through virtualisation? Clear differences between on-line and off-line social groups do exist. Paramount among these is the lack of necessity for physical and/or spatial proximity which has led to the 'de-territorialisation' (Cova *et al.*, 2007) of virtual groups. Thus, emerging digital modes of information exchange have effectively

undermined traditional geographically based definitions of social groups (Komito, 2001). This has, in turn, had implications on the logistical and social costs of participation within such groups (Tapscott and Williams, 2006). Another key difference is the ‘invisibility’ of group members (Lin, 2007). However, a lack of face-to-face communication does not necessarily preclude social interaction. Indeed, there is often a tendency to confuse the mode of interaction with the content of a relationship and the mode of communication should not necessarily preclude relationship attributes such as the development of trust and commitment (Komito, 2001). Often these virtual communities demonstrate “*more than the mere transmission of information*” (Kozinets, 1999: 253) but the manifestation of a “*sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality*” (Carey, 1989: 18). The most coherent of such virtual groups are those whose members ‘*exhibit a passion for*’ and have ‘*implicated their own identities deeply and lastingly with the consumption object and its symbolism*’ (Kozinets, 1999: 261). To this end, technologies are used as both the medium and the message to identify others who have similar passions and as a result, virtual meetings and social interaction may ensue between individuals and groups often culminating in the establishment of a virtual communal meeting place or ‘anchoring event’.

These virtual communities comprise of individuals who know (often by a pseudonym) and assist each other through some form of ‘reciprocal exchange’ (Fernback, 1999). Despite geographical and spatial dispersion, these groups of individuals are able to connect synchronistically with each other in real time (Grassian and Trueman, 2007). Such communities are defined by Kozinets (1999) as “*affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific*

*consumption activity or related group of activities*” (p. 254). Similar to off-line communities, varying degrees of participation among community members may be identified moderated by the extent of self identification the individual has with the consumption activity or object together with the degree of social identity and resultant level of interaction the individual has with the community. A number of typologies have been proposed based on these moderating influences (e.g. Kozinets, 1999; Blanchard and Markus, 2004). For example, where there is a low level of self identification resulting in a limited social interaction but perhaps some form of information exchange, Kozinets’s (1999) assigns the term ‘tourists’ to encapsulate the characteristics of this group. At the other extreme ‘insiders’ (Kozinets, 1999) may be identified who exhibit a high level of self identification and social interaction with the group and its consumption activity. Blanchard and Markus (2004), augmenting the work of Nielsen’s ‘inequality of participation’ suggest participants in online communities may be classified as ‘leaders’ (comprising of the 1% of members who participate frequently and are recognised within the community), ‘posters’ (comprising of the 9% of members who post less frequently) and ‘lurkers’ (comprising of the remainder who do not post but read the information within the community).

Whilst the terms ‘virtual community’ and ‘e-tribe’ appear to be used interchangeable in the literature (e.g. Kozinets, 1999), Cova and Cova (2002) make a clear distinction suggesting a Northern European interpretation of ‘community’ merely “*characterises a body of people with something in common*” (p. 598) and that with the advent of the internet, this concept of commonality is increasingly synonymous with an object of ‘interest’. This negates the non-rational, emotionally based understanding



characterised by the Latin interpretation of ‘community’ inherent within tribal analogies. Drawing further on tribal analogies, Komito (2001) identifies parallels with archaic hunter gatherer and foraging tribes. Members share standards of appropriate norms of acceptable behaviour. There may be no central authority with the implication that solutions to disputes and conflicts may not be imposed on unwilling participants. Whilst there are leaders whose opinions are respected, these leaders *‘lead through example or persuasion with an emphasis on their rhetorical abilities, achievements and [relevant] skills’* (p. 122). Where conflict and disputes emerge and cannot be resolved, tribal members ‘vote with their feet’. That said, Cova and Cova (2002) identify clear distinctions between virtual tribes and archaic tribes culminating in the possible enclaving of ‘life-mode cultures’ by contemporary individuals. This refers to the phenomena of e-tribal members living a ‘normal life’ as opposed to *“constantly remaining within their singularly preferred countercultural domain”* (Firat and Dholakia, 1998:144). Indeed, it is possible to belong to a number of virtual tribes simultaneously.

Clearly, such differing interpretations and characteristics will affect marketing activities within such contexts. Using the literature as a basis to inform research design, this investigation explored the relevancy of the tribal analogy and its implications for marketers to a modern virtual community, where the context is premised on second generation web technologies. More specifically, the key aims of the study were to:

- firstly, establish the nature and characteristics of one such virtual community;
- secondly, to explore the modes of member involvement with the community and evaluate the role of second generation web technologies;

- thirdly, to examine attitudes towards commercialisation and marketing behaviour.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Given the aims of this investigation and the nature of the study, a mixed method qualitative research design was deemed to be appropriate. Such an approach enables ‘deep’ and ‘rich’ insights (Geertz, 1973), allows for the recording of complex human behaviour and social systems (e.g. Feyerabend, 1981; Maxwell, 1996) and is useful for examining developing social processes. Previous literature in this field suggests that virtual communities and tribes are open to many diverse interpretations; therefore qualitative research is a valuable tool to ‘*confirm, contrast and contribute to*’ academic literature (Garver, 2003) and to capture contextual richness (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) such as that evident in the focal community.

Data was collected in three phases (see Table 1). Firstly, extensive documentation was collated based on participant-observation (Fletcher, 2002) of one of the researchers who became a part of the community whilst supporting an ‘anchoring event’ ie., a film festival. Secondly, interviews were conducted with key informants (McCracken, 1988). Thirdly, data was collated from blogging sites to support convergent findings. The findings are reported using an ethnographic tradition (Agafonoff, 2006; Sherry, 2008).

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Theory on social identity and tribal behaviour was used to construct a discussion guide for semi-structured interviews with key informants, but with scope to explore

interesting aspects that emerged during the data collection phase (Maxwell, 1996; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Skype (internet recording) technology was used to conduct interviews with geographically dispersed community members. Interviews with key informants lasted between one and two hours and were subsequently transcribed to facilitate content analysis (King, 1998). Content analysis was used to reduce data to key themes (Krippendorff, 2004; Weber, 1990) in a qualitative mode. The data collected was used to develop a conceptual map of individual member involvement in the community and to infer patterns of collaboration among members, including the range of the roles played by individuals and technologies. A reiterative approach was adopted (Remenyi *et al.*, 1998) to inform subsequent stages as new insights and evidence emerged. The mixed method approach was deemed appropriate to enable triangulation of findings from the range of different data sources used. Ethics was considered to be an implicit part of the research design (Hair and Clark, 2007). Participant-observation was overt. A code of conduct for participation in the anchoring event was published and written consent was sought from all participants. Permission was sought for all recordings of interviews. All the identities of informants and members of the community are protected to preserve confidentiality, anonymity and privacy. Content (films, blog postings) collated was user-published and widely accessible over the internet, although where comments can be attributed to identifiable members, these are protected. Finally, research findings were discussed with key informants.

Findings are presented in three key areas. Initially, there is an exploration of the evolution of the focal community together with an assessment as to how this has shaped its emergent characteristics and values. Subsequently, findings on the nature

of tribal identity and the extent of tribal connectivity are presented. Finally, the impact of commercialising behaviour on the community is examined.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### *The Machinima Tribe: a second generation internet community*

Machinima (pronounced ‘muh-shin-eh-mah’) is defined as “*film-making within a real-time 3D virtual environment, combining three creative contexts: film-making, animation and games development*” (Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences, 2008). It is a technology mediated medium enabling the dissemination of user-generated content through second generation internet sites such as YouTube, Vimeo and community specific sites. Its emergence can be traced back to the mid 1990s when computerised game players produced short films to illustrate the extent of their technical skills to opponents and fellow players of computer games. These films were originally called ‘Doom’ and ‘Quake’ movies after the original games engines in which they were filmed. The term ‘Machinima’ was coined by Hancock (2000) to label the emerging phenomena and is a misspelling of an amalgamation of the words ‘machine’ and ‘cinema’. Machinima has subsequently evolved to incorporate the process of manipulating computer games production tools (such as demo recording, camera angles, game levels, script editors, etc) and game resources and cosmetics (backgrounds, textures, characters, avatars, skins, etc) available within the games to render animated films. By such actions, players can “*transform themselves into actors, directors and even camera operatives*” (Lowood, 2005). As such, Machinima encapsulates the ‘*convergence of filmmaking, animation and game development*’ (Dellario, 1996). This contrasts to more traditional forms of game play, where the participant’s role is exclusively that of a player and there is an established start and

outcome defined within the game (Juul, 2005). In contrast to traditional gamers, Machinimators do not seek to maximise a 'personal best' score, but to exhibit their technical prowess to an appreciating audience. The online, real-time attributes also allow third parties to modify the film. The implications of this are that the traditional concept of game 'authorship' and 'ownership' no longer apply. Once released, games are to a large extent, beyond the control of the original authors and are continually being modified by Machinimators with such behaviour interpreted by some as games 'evolution'. As Lowood states (2005): "*When a computer game is released today, it is as much a set of design tools as a finished game design*" (p15).

Machinima is, therefore, an example of emergent or transformative game-play. Although primarily the domain of home-producers, it has also been used by professional film-makers such as Spielberg. Crucially however, it appears more professional than is possible with more traditional 'home' animated production using live video tape, toy props or hand drawn animation. The rendering of the game is done in-real time on the web at virtually no cost using the computers of either the 'creator' or 'viewer'. Thus, the real-time nature of Machinima means that established techniques from traditional film-making can be applied to a virtual environment. Creators can produce and record their own manipulations of particular games. As a result of the inclusion of third party modification facilities, multiplayer games have become popular and are being used in a wide variety of contexts including educational tools (for example, Linden Lab's Second Life is now popular as a virtual Higher Education teaching and learning environment).

Productions are shared online in virtual communities and have '*fostered the creation of active communities of players and coders*' (Lowood, 2005). Different participants excel at different facets of the manipulation process (such as movement tricks, marksmanship or stalking), which has in turn resulted in some Machinimators becoming 'celebrities' very often using pseudonyms. Indeed, Lowood (2005) highlights how Machinima relies on the spectatorship of others and '*... is created within and for virtual communities of enthusiasts*' (p.15). Thus, outlets for participants to exhibit their technical prowess and a supporting social infrastructure have also emerged. Virtual groups or 'clans' comprising players, coders and film-makers, who are prepared to share information and knowledge distributed through and embedded within second generation internet technologies have formed and compete with other 'rival' clans. To quote Lowood (2006): "*As in hacker culture, sharing knowledge about otherwise hidden aspects of the software lead to impressive technical achievements*" (p.33). Additionally, it provides a platform for both 'performers' and 'spectators' to increase their clan's reputation through exhibiting indicative narrative, technical virtuosity and the extent to which they infiltrate 'the system' (Lowood, 2005). In short, clans stage an 'artistic performance' (Lowood, 2006). This has been facilitated as a result of producers of some computer games recognising the ability of groups 'to exploit' their products for purposes other than those they originally envisioned and thus allowing and even encouraging access to technology and tools for modifying content. This deliberate advocacy of the modification of its own software by the producers of such games is interpreted by many within the Machinima community as recognition of the loss of authorial control of such games and that this was not only inevitable but should be positively embraced. Indeed, the early producers of these games had previously acquired

reputations themselves as hackers into more mainstream computer games and so these actions may be interpreted as ‘tribal support’.

Evolving from a computer games culture, there has historically been an emphasis on ‘fun and play’. More recently however, it is increasingly being perceived as ‘*the artistic medium of the digital age*’ (Lowood, 2006: 25) and is beginning to be used by commercial organisations to produce short films and advertisements. Indeed, whilst Machinima was originally restricted to technically savvy gamers, more recent software developments have reduced the extent of technical knowledge required and Machinima has become more widely accessible. To quote Nitsche (2006): ‘*Machinima has spread beyond the hard-core gaming community and emerged as a wide-spread form of cultural expression*’ (p.8). Machinima has increasingly been exhibited at film festivals and art exhibitions, and is used for commercial film, television and theatre productions, although it remains most popular as user-generated content consumed via the internet. However, together with this wider recognition of the Machinima phenomena have been increasing attempts by individuals and organisations to optimise the commercial opportunities that this may offer. The paper proceeds by exploring how such changes are affecting the identity and the extent of members’ connectivity with community values. Subsequently, attitudes towards commercialisation behaviour are examined.

#### *The Nature of Tribal Identity, the Extent of Tribal Connectivity and the Moderating Influence of the Changing Environment*

There are explicit indications of tribal connectivity and support for the consumption activity. At one level, tribal identity is evident in how meanings are constructed

through game playing and, to some extent, maintained through the use of particular software games platforms which clearly link community members together. Much of the nature of interaction at this level centres on information exchange. As one informant comments: *“we all tend to know what games are out there... and one of the things that is very common to see on the forums is a lot of questions and answers from people...”* (Informant 3). However, at another level, there was also evidence of an emotional attachment and associated *‘sharing of passion’* with terms such as ‘love’ and ‘devotion’ being used by informants to describe the extent of their level of attachment to the consumption activity in particular and community ‘ideals’ in general. There was a general recognition among respondents of *‘the pursuit of creating something better’* through the process of *‘self-growth’*, *‘the sharing of ideas and skills’* and *‘knowledge expansion’*. Implicit within these processes was a perception that the community was self supporting by being non-judgmental of its members. As one informant states: *“you become lost in the information that flows between people, you do not have reservations, you do not fear a person’s judgment”* (Informant 5). Relationship building through dialogic and democratic exchange was viewed as critical to the collaborative process of Machinima development in a virtual environment. One informant suggests the Machinima community encapsulates *“socialism, technical expertise, sharing of talent, sharing of personalities, sharing of people’s likes for different styles of genres and writing styles”* (Informant 2).

Many of the virtual tribal dimensions identified by Komito (2001) were evidenced. A range of synchronous and asynchronous media were used by members (e.g. email, Skype, chat rooms, social networking sites and games environments). These facilitated or encompassed many of the activities and outcomes of off-line anchoring points ranging from functional information exchange through to other ‘softer’



activities such as sustaining membership, reaffirming and strengthening the underlying values of the group and providing a platform to bring together and bond individual members of the tribe. As one informant comments: *“in a virtual world especially, you need a place for people to congregate and express themselves and communicate”* (Informant 3). This is further evidenced in the way that many Machinimators use online pseudonyms which are widely known within the community and which are directly linked to individuals’ real names in both the fora they choose to support and their own blog postings.

With many other virtual communities, the consumption of the activity or object may be in an off-line environment and synchronous and asynchronous media are used purely as an enabler to share ‘stories’ and ‘experiences’ on-line between community members. However, with the Machinima community, on-line participation in Machinima production may be a key part of the consumption activity in itself. Thus, the games engines are themselves seen as central to tribal activities. As one informant comments *“[Machinima’s intrinsic virtualness provides] a laboratory that enables you to try out ideas without costing you US\$1.5M [so] you are not tethered to anything [physical resources such as cranes for cameras]”* (Informant 3). As a result, the process is viewed as *“an extremely democratic way of producing and distributing content and I think that’s very much the underlying concept of a lot of the things we do especially within the community”* (Informant 1). That said, informants recognised that there were variations in the level of commitment of its members. Most informants described their own involvement as “devoted” with other community members being categorised by their perceived level of interest and participation: *“there are the historic members, the people who are now making a living out of it, the amateurs, the researchers”* (Informant 1).

With the exponential growth in the popularity of Machinima in recent years, there has been an accompanying ‘breaking out’ of a purely internet forum with an increasing recognition of Machinima in more mainstream film and arts festivals. Further evidence of the extension of Machinima as a mainstream medium may be found in the range of activities undertaken by the Machinima community. One group of Machinimators has led the way in adapting the medium for television with their content currently appearing on the US TV series, Crime Scene Investigation. However, it is in its internet-based form that Machinima presents its most competitive challenges to more traditionally consumed film content. A key difference in terms of consumption activity is the positive and proactive level of engagement required to download a Machinima episode that is not typically associated with more passive television viewing. Indeed, one Machinima series (currently consisting of over 100 episodes) is reported to be downloaded by over one million regular viewers. The makers of the series are now cult celebrities with their forum receiving over 240,000 posts a week (Forum 2). Responses from informants reflected a recognition of this evolutionary and transient nature in terms of both the medium and increasingly, the community with terms such as ‘flexible’, ‘fragmented’ and even ‘mutant’ being used to describe this phenomena. However, despite this the unifying ‘bona fida’ values of the tribe, the ‘protection’ of these values and the tribes advancement for the benefit of all members were still perceived to exist. As one informant states :“[Machinimators are] *conservative right now about what they say, because of the impact they would have on [other Machinimators] and the games, how games people view us and everything. But that’s a good thing, I think, because it gives strength to the community*” (Informant 1). Moreover, respondents articulated the importance of

bringing new people into the community and undertaking a ‘socialisation’ process with them:

*“We have all shared something similar, legal and technical problems, and I think that keeps us pretty united and very much aware that we have to help out people who are starting” (Informant 1).*

### *Commercialising Behaviour and its Implications*

The increased exposure and ‘mainstreaming’ of Machinima has inevitably led to the commercialisation of certain aspects of the phenomena and this is recognised by informants:

*“the Machinima community started as an amateur, subversive, artistic, experimental movement and indeed it was and still is, especially as a technique. However, I think that games companies have acknowledged all that it is bringing to them, and now people in TV and film people acknowledge that Machinima has a lot to say” (Informant 1).*

However, unlike many other tribes, it is frequently tribal members that are involved in commercial projects. An individual community member’s commercial involvement is often the result of an initially ad hoc process whereby the individual, usually of ‘leader’ status within the tribe, experiences a ‘creeping’ level of involvement with Machinima over a period of time to the extent that they are subsequently able to sustain an income from these activities. Indeed, websites are often established and supported by the original producers of games and comprise discussion boards for communities of modifiers to exchange information and distribute their work. Hence, the switch from amateur to professional may often be seamless. As a result, these individuals are still firmly embedded within the tribe and immersed in its values. Those Machinimators involved with commercialising aspects of Machinima are recognised and known by other members of the tribe. Of paramount importance to these individuals is the maintenance of their status within the tribe particularly in

terms of trust and integrity. As ‘leaders’, these individuals recognise that their involvement may directly influence the community but are unsure as to how this may manifest itself. As one informant comments: *“One of the interesting things with this community is that you don’t really know how your involvement will cause the community to evolve!”* (Informant 2).

In view of these individuals’ level of ‘respect’ and ‘connectiveness’ with the tribe, the tribe generally views such commercial activity with positive support, and the relationship with the commercial organisation is valued. However, members tend to be more critical of commercial organisations’ attempts to make use of the genre when it is not associated with an acknowledged Machinimator. Commercial organisations have recognised this and as a result, are increasingly recruiting members of the tribe for the development of Machinima related products as one posting illustrates:

*“xx [games company] grabs yet more Machinimators: in their seemingly never-ending quest to scoop up everyone from the Machinima community that they haven’t yet employed, xx [games company] have just employed xxx and xxx [names of Machinimators]”.* (Forum 1)

The dissemination of Machinima related products within the community has traditionally focussed on an organic process whereby word of mouth is used to gain acceptance for Machinima producing software and such activities are largely perceived as unobtrusive by the community. A key issue moderating this approach appears to be the inherent resistance of the community to more overt marketing tactics: *“If it really doesn’t happen organically [acceptance of a company’s product] and it’s not picked up by the community then they shouldn’t really push it”* (Informant 1). That said, more recent and overt attempts to ‘infiltrate’ the community may also be identified as one informant explains:

*“They [the software producers] are trying to sort of suggest to people to take a look at products... trying to adapt for people so they like what they are using. They are trying to respect people’s opinions and their skill sets and are saying to people if you could suggest what you want, what tools would you use, then we will try to make those” (Informant 2).*

Many community members interpret this positively and perceive it as ‘collusion’ between the tribe and such organisations. However, the adoption of such an approach has led to some tensions within the tribe resulting in dialogic exchange and opinion seeking between tribal members, especially the core tribal members and the wider community. Key areas of contention are the potential compromising of the democratic and co-productive nature of Machinima production within the tribe and the fundamental sacrificing of artistic expression that the Machinima process encapsulates particularly by those individuals who may be involved at a ‘professional’ level. There is a concern that such activities may lead to an increasing ‘factionisation’ of the tribe (Kozinets, 1999) in terms of a professional-amateur split. These tensions are reflected in the responses of some of the informants: *“I care more about art than profit, but it’s about survival for some people...” (Informant 2)* and *“obviously we would like to be the first Machinima company to make a million... but we’re unlikely to achieve that” (Informant 4)* all illustrate the mixed emotional response that collusion between organisations and the community arouses. Crucially however, there is much evidence to suggest that there is a perceived imperative among community members that the genre must retain its core values despite these tensions. Responses such as *“obviously the numbers will grow, and the percentages will grow in regards to amateurs versus professional, but I think the values will remain the same” (Informant 3)* and *“[Machinima] is the very essence of what the internet was supposed to be – an open area of expression and access to all sorts of information or different forms of media expression” (Informant 2)* highlight this.

## MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

If marketers are to optimise the potential of consumption based communities such as the Machinima community, they need to understand how such communities emerge and evolve and indeed, continuously ‘re-invent’ themselves within the virtual world. Such groups tend to be fluid, unstable and dynamic in terms of *‘setting standards, negotiating them with other members, redrawing group boundaries in terms of consumption and constantly assessing those corporations whose products are important to them’* (Kozinets, 1999: 257). Indeed, members are *‘deeply involved in articulating and re-articulating their consumption activities’* (Kozinets, 1999: 257). As a result, huge amounts of information are exchanged about consumption activities much of which remains a vast untapped source to marketing organisations. These communities are complex networks of exchange interaction that only insiders fully comprehend. One-to-one marketing models associated with more traditional binodal communication channels are redundant within such contexts (e.g. Kozinets, 1999; Cova and Cova, 2002). Frequently, such communities are implicitly discerning or indeed actively opposed (Cova and Cova, 2002) to marketing activities and may resist overt consumption offerings from marketing organisations. However, frequently *‘the presence of the market is acceptable ....as long as the exploitative, manipulation and socially isolating outcomes of the market can be said to be absent’* (Kozinets, 2002: 36).

These findings corroborate those of Kozinets insofar as the participatory and inclusive culture of Machinima with its blurring of the distinction between producer and consumer has meant that many embedded within the tribe are able to participate in subtle or covert marketing activities and through such activities ‘actively convert’

(Kozinets, 1999) other members' consumption behaviour whilst maintaining their status and integrity within the tribe. A critical issue from a marketing perspective is the identification and recruitment of such individuals. Very often, a subtle and collaborative approach must be undertaken to gain acceptance from tribal members. This may involve co-producing or providing such members with 'enablers' that are sensitive to *'the meaning, connection, inspiration, aspiration and even mystery and sense of purpose that is related to their shared consumption activities'* (Kozinets, 1999). Thus, the emphasis is not on gaining market share but on gaining acceptance from and joining in tribal activities. Within the Machinima community, members are continually seeking ways to manipulate games in ways that the developers would not have anticipated. Once released for public consumption, such games are beyond the control of the original authors but are continually being modified in real-time and hence are in effect, evolving. However, many producers accept the loss of authorial control of such games on release as inevitable and 'embrace' the modification of its own software perceiving it to be part of the consumption experience. As Kozinets (1999) observes, *"in the digital economy ...networks are what build value and networks are often created by giving things away.....the goal is not to control information but to use it wisely in order to build solid, long-lasting relationships "* (p. 263). Perhaps this is a model more organisations engaging in relationship marketing activities need to consider adopting.

## CONCLUSION

This exploratory research contributes to our understanding of relationships with customers in virtual communities. It highlights how such communities' multifarious

nature has serious implications in the way consumption objects and activities should be marketed to and within them. At one level, such communities provide opportunities to define, take ownership and solve issues surrounding consumption activities. At another level, they provide a platform for self-expression and creativity within complex subcultures. However, the increasingly fragmented and dynamic nature of online communities together with their widely differing and unique values, the nature of informational and social exchange that they enable, their fluid membership and structures and even their *modus operandi* necessitates an intricate knowledge and understanding by marketing organisations if they are to be successful in developing relationships with, and marketing to such communities. In relation to the Machinima community, those commercial organisations that have been successful in building relationships appear sensitive to the values of the community and have adopted marketing activities that may be described as both ‘covert and collusive’ insofar as tribal members are involved in or recruited to help ‘co-develop tribal experiences’.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the research methodology for the current study, the implications of these findings suggest other organisations may also need to consider more subtle and sophisticated relationship marketing activities within some e-contexts than have been used in more traditional offline contexts if they are to be successful. In terms of the Machinima community, further research would benefit from a greater understanding of the organisational perspective of the issues highlighted in this study.



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Table 1 : Data Collection Process

<b>Data</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Data Collection Period</b>	<b>Analytical Methods Employed</b>
Machinima Europe Festival 2007	<p><i>Phase 1:</i>  <i>Research questions 1 and 2</i>  Researcher directed festival in October 2007, Leicester, UK. Data collated comprises:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• extensive correspondence with community leaders (Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences and Machinima Europe Board and includes email and telephone call notes);</li> <li>• film-makers about film-making (83 festival entrant documentation);</li> <li>• network collaborations and film content (156 films – videos ranging between 30seconds and 1:40minutes);</li> <li>• distribution (resources used) and technologies employed (software and hardware) and film review panel (35 individuals, includes email and telephone call notes).</li> </ul>	March to November 2007	Participant observation; content analysis of documents and films; conceptual maps of community and individual member involvement
Key informant interviews	<p><i>Phase 2</i>  <i>Research questions 1, 2 and 3</i>  Semi-structured interviews with 5 community leaders with interviews lasting between 1 and 2 hours.</p>	April to May 2008	Content analysis; conceptual maps
Virtual fora	<p><i>Phase 3</i>  <i>Research questions 2 and 3</i>  6 virtual community fora:  Machinimafordummies.com;  Machinima.org; Machinima.com;  mprem.com; moviestorm.co.uk;  roosterteeth.com</p>	May 2008	Content analysis; conceptual maps

